

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Louis Johnson

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Johnson, Louis, 1930- |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, |
| Dates: | June 9, 2005 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2005 |
| Physical Description: | 6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:42:13). |
| Abstract: | Ballet dancer, dance professor, and choreographer Louis Johnson (1930 - 2020) has choreographed for the stage in, "Damn Yankees," and, "Hallelujah Baby," and for screen in, "The Wiz," and, "Cotton Comes to Harlem." In 1980, he started Henry Street Settlement's Dance Department in New York City. He also taught the first black theater course at Yale University, and started Howard University's dance department in Washington, D.C. Johnson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 9, 2005, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2005_134 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Director and choreographer Louis Johnson was born on March 19, 1930, in Statesville, North Carolina, but moved with his parents to Washington, D.C., at an early age. Although Johnson became quickly known in the Washington, D.C., school system for his outstanding artistic talents, he also developed a strong following for his gymnastic and dancing talents. In high school, he enrolled and trained at the Jones Haywood School of Dance, where he and such notable students as Chita Rivera blossomed under the tutelage of Doris Jones and Clair Haywood.

After being advised to move by his teachers to New York City, Johnson found himself at the famed New York City School of American Ballet, where he was mentored by Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine. These associations led directly to a performance with the New York City Ballet Company and then on to Broadway shows such as *Four Saints in Three Acts*, *House of Flowers* (choreographed by George Balanchine), *Damn Yankees* (by Bob Fosse) and *Hallelujah Baby*. His public acclaim in these Broadway performances led to an offer to choreograph his ballet, *Lament* for the New York City Ballet Club. That success, in turn, led to him receiving an offer to choreograph the Broadway production *Black Nativity* by Langston Hughes. Johnson also choreographed *Lost in the Stars*, *Treemonisha* and *Purlie*, for which he received a Tony nomination.

Johnson has received the great acclaim for choreographing operas performed by the New York Metropolitan Opera. Those operas include *La Giaconda*, starring Martina La Rowa and *Aida*, which starred Leontyne Price. In movies, he choreographed *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and *The Wiz*, starring Michael Jackson and Diana Ross. In addition to his work in New York City, Johnson has mounted ballets for the Cincinnati Ballet, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, the Joffrey Ballet, Philadanco Dance Company, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the

Atlanta Ballet Company. In 1980, he started Henry Street Settlement's Dance Department in New York City. He continued to work there until 2003. He also taught the first Black theatre course at Yale University and started Howard University's Dance Department in Washington, D.C.

Johnson's honors include: the Pioneer Award from the International Association of Blacks in Dance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.; an honor from the California chapter of the NAACP for his work with the original Negro Ensemble Company; and a special night honoring him from Ashford and Simpson. His directorial credits include *Porgy and Bess*, *Miss Truth*, *Jazzbo Brown*, *Time in the Wind* and *Ebony Game*.

Johnson passed away on March 31, 2020.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Louis Johnson was conducted by Paul Brock on June 9, 2005, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Ballet dancer, dance professor, and choreographer Louis Johnson (1930 - 2020) has choreographed for the stage in, "Damn Yankees," and, "Hallelujah Baby," and for screen in, "The Wiz," and, "Cotton Comes to Harlem." In 1980, he started Henry Street Settlement's Dance Department in New York City. He also taught the first black theater course at Yale University, and started Howard University's dance department in Washington, D.C.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Johnson, Louis, 1930-

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Johnson, Louis, 1930---Interviews

African American dance teachers--Interviews

African American dancers--Interviews

Choreographers--Interviews

African Americans--Genealogy

Dance schools--New York (State)--New York

School of American Ballet

Theatrical producers and directors--Interviews

Musicals--New York (State)--New York--Production and direction

Metropolitan Opera (New York, N.Y.). Ballet

Ed Sullivan show (Television program)

Radio City Music Hall (New York, N.Y.). Corps de ballet

Negro Ensemble Company

Atlanta (Ga.)--Social life and customs

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)--Social life and customs

Howard University

Allen, Debbie, 1950-

Primus, Pearl

Dunham, Katherine

Discrimination in employment

Dance companies--United States

Dance

Choreography

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Dancer

Choreographer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, June 9, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, Section A2005_134_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 ?

Director and choreographer Louis Johnson begins by describing his mother and grandmother and recalling his childhood and school years in North Carolina and Washington, D.C. He remembers his early involvement in acrobatics and dance, and lists influential dancers who inspired him. Johnson also discusses his family's decision to send him to ballet school in New York City and shares memories from his time there.

African American dance teachers--Interviews.

African American dancers--Interviews.

Choreographers--Interviews.

African Americans--Genealogy.

Dance schools--New York (State)--New York.

School of American Ballet.

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Metropolitan Opera (New York, N.Y.). Ballet.

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Radio City Music Hall (New York, N.Y.). Corps de ballet.

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Atlanta (Ga.)--Social life and customs.

Harlem (New York, N.Y.)--Social life and customs.

Howard University.

Allen, Debbie, 1950-.

Primus, Pearl.

Dunham, Katherine.

Discrimination in employment.

Dance companies--United States.

Dance.

Choreography.

Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, Section A2005_134_001_002, TRT: 0:28:10 ?

Louis Johnson recalls his experiences at the School of American Ballet and discusses his early career on Broadway. He talks about transitioning into directing and choreography, and discusses his successful productions of *The House of Flowers*, *Damn Yankees!*, and *Hallelujah Baby*. He also talks about his choreography for the Metropolitan Opera, the Ed Sullivan Show, and Radio City Music Hall.

Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, Section A2005_134_001_003, TRT: 0:29:20 ?

Louis Johnson reflects on his style of choreography, and how he applies it to new projects. He recalls his years in Atlanta, Georgia, and Harlem, New York, and discusses a number of well-known performers with whom he has worked. He also mentions instances of discrimination he has experienced and discusses his time with the famed Negro Ensemble Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, Section A2005_134_001_004, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

Louis Johnson recalls his years with the Howard University dance department. He remembers his success with such productions as Treemonisha, The Wiz, and Ebony Game. Johnson also recounts a number of awards he won, and reflects on the career of Debbie Allen.

Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, Section A2005_134_001_005, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Louis Johnson remembers his productions of The Ebony Game, Miss Truth, Jazzbo Brown, and Time and the Wind. In recalling those productions, he comments on the careers of many performers whom he has known, such as Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham. Johnson concludes by reflecting on his life and legacy, including how he dealt with racial discrimination in his career.

Video Oral History Interview with Louis Johnson, Section A2005_134_001_006, TRT: 0:14:52 ?

Louis Johnson narrates his photographs.